

# EARLY AMERICAN WORD PUZZLES (PART 1)

WILLIAM F. SHORTZ  
Crawfordsville, Indiana

For the millions of puzzle fans in the United States today, puzzles serve as a unique form of mental recreation. They amuse, they intrigue, and they pass the time. People like puzzles because words themselves are fascinating and most people like to be challenged.

Still, few puzzle fans look upon the study of puzzles with a serious attitude; puzzles have an undeniable aura of silliness or childishness. How many people today agree with a declaration made nearly 40 years ago by "Archimedes", a past president of the National Puzzlers' League?

"Aside from the aspect of erudition, puzzling to us (NPL members) is an art. For ingenuity of conception, brilliancy of wit, subtlety of humor, and facility of expression, many of our creations can well match expression in the other arts. And the corresponding quality of psychologic insight, keen analysis, and profundity of learning are distinctly typical of the best in science."

(The Enigma, August 1937, p. 3)

An art! As amazing as it may seem, before the word search, the double-croctic and the crossword became popular (these were all twentieth-century American inventions), puzzling was looked upon by many persons as an art form. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, puzzles appeared in the best literary periodicals as well as in books, magazines, and newspapers of many kinds.

Today, puzzles have lost that aura of dignity which they rightly deserve. Their early history is unknown to even the most ardent puzzlist. Few people are aware of the role word puzzles have played in American culture and the close connection they have had to the growth of literature in general in the United States. Puzzles may be only an amusement, but they are an intellectual amusement, and their history is an important part of the history of literary and intellectual thought.

Word puzzling is a surprisingly complex subject, and its history is not straightforward to write; one can easily lose sight of the forest for the trees. It is important to keep in mind that a history of word puzzling interweaves three complementary strands: the publications sponsoring word puzzles, the puzzle types appearing therein, and the people solving them. Profound changes in the where, the what and the who of American puzzledom occurred during the two hundred years spanned by this monograph.

It is surprising how old the history of word puzzling in America really is. We have no sure idea when puzzles were first introduced. Few written manuscripts of our country's early literature have survived. Perhaps none of them had any word puzzles at all. Certainly many educated colonists were aware of word puzzles, because literary riddling and various forms of wordplay were popular in British and European circles.

The earliest record we have of puzzles in America (and it is a very early record indeed) is Samuel Danforth's An Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1647, printed in Cambridge. Danforth's 1647 almanac is only the twenty-first work known to have been printed in the United States, and the second earliest almanac to have survived.

Samuel Danforth, the author of the twelve puzzle poems that appeared in the almanac, was a very intelligent man. He was born in England and came to America with his father in 1634. He graduated from Harvard College in 1643 and was later appointed a tutor there. His four almanacs, printed from 1646 to 1649, are the oldest American almanacs that are known to exist today.

Each of Danforth's twelve enigmatic verses appeared next to the astronomical and astrological data of one of the months, and each puzzle was related to the month in which it was printed. The following enigma, probably the easiest one, appeared in July:

"The wooden Birds are now in sight,  
Whose voices roare, whose wings are white,  
Whose mawes are fill'd with hose and shooes,  
With wine, cloth, sugar, salt and newes,  
When they have eas'd their stomachs here  
They cry, farewell untill next yeare."

The "wooden Birds ... whose wings are white" were ships bringing supplies to the colonists. The puzzle employed one of the simplest of enigmatic devices, the metaphor. Although the verse was by no means great poetry, it was well done. As the American literary historian Kenneth Murdock noted in his book Handkerchiefs from Paul (Harvard University Press, 1927), "Though by no means impeccable in execution, ... they deal with the every-day concerns of life in Puritan Massachusetts, so that they preserve a flavor of reality not now discernible for most readers in the elegies ... If he falls short of picturesqueness, he does at least give the flavor of the soil."

"Great bridges shall be made alone  
Without ax, timber, earth or stone,  
Of chrystall metall, like to glass;  
Such wondrous works soon come to passe,  
If you may then have such a way,  
The Ferry-man you need not pay."

In this January enigma, the maker of the bridges is the cold, which freezes the bays and streams.

Literature itself, particularly poetry, was very scarce in colonial America. People were more concerned with the basic problems of life: making homes in the wilderness and carving out a livelihood under primitive conditions. Very little time was left for leisure and literary pursuits. Furthermore, the Puritans of New England were deeply concerned with religious affairs. Although they were not hostile to literature and the fine arts, they certainly regarded the church as a more fitting outlet for literary and intellectual activities. In this social environment, the fact that word puzzles were written and published at all serves to show the appeal that puzzles in general hold for people.

A number of other seventeenth-century almanacs had enigmas similar to the ones published by Danforth. The next American word puzzle appeared in Samuel Cheever's An Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1660. Cheever wrote his verses as a youth or young man, for he was born only 21 years before his almanac was published. The enigmas that appeared in Cheever's almanac were somewhat different from the ones that appeared in Danforth's. The topics chosen to be enigmatized had less of the rustic flavor, and the verses contained a great deal of classical allusion. The enigma for March, for example, described the melting of the winter snow:

"Faire Tellus now (whom in her tripping pace  
Lord AEolus t'unmaske her lovely face,  
With charming suits, and plaints could ne're perswade  
Nor yet by force constraine, though h' oft assay'd)  
No sooner comes to Titan in's attire  
But that his rayes setting her heart on fire  
The sparkling flames her rosy cheekes soon scale  
Where causing sweat, shee quickly doffs her veile."

Tellus was the earth, who was covered with snow in the winter. AEolus was the ruler of the winds, and he was unsuccessful in blowing away the snow. Finally Titan, the Sun, was able to melt the snow.

There were a number of other delightful enigmas in Cheever's 1660 almanac. The puzzle for September contained two lines which referred to the autumnal equinox:

"I'th chair of state, in equi-poize there stand  
Justice her Scales, whil'st causes all are scan'd."

The October puzzle enigmatically described the fall harvest, and the December riddle was about the coming of the winter snow. The puzzles were evidently well received because more of the same appeared in Cheever's almanac for 1661.

A third group of puzzles appeared in William Brattle's An Ephemeris of Coelestial Motions, Aspects, Eclipses, &c. For the Year of the Christian Era 1682, published in Cambridge. Brattle is remembered best for being pastor of the church in Cambridge, and also for writing a well-known treatise on logic. When he collected the material for his almanac and wrote the verse for it, however, he was still in his youth;

records show that William Brattle was born just nineteen years before his almanac was published.

The twelve enigmas in Brattle's almanac, one for each month, were similar to the ones which appeared in Danforth's and Cheever's almanacs. Although the verses themselves were not excellent, the puzzles were clever enough. In some of them, Brattle appeared to prognosticate strange events. In the May puzzle, he predicted:

"Hundreds of Apes all most every where  
Will now appear with wings flying in th' Air,  
Who will be bravely Arm'd with such a Spear,  
That th' Stoutest men them for to Vex will fear,  
But ( Friends) Fear not, this news it doth portend  
No harm at all, but sweet things in the End."

The answer, of course, was the appearance of bees in the spring. The first line of the poem contained a good pun: Apes is not only the name of an animal in English, but also the word for "bees" in Latin.

One of the most interesting enigmas to appear in an almanac was written by Benjamin Franklin, appearing in his Poor Richard's Almanack for 1736. Franklin wrote three riddles altogether for that almanac, calling them "Enigmatical Prophecies, Which they that do not understand, cannot well explain." The cleverest of the three enigmas was the last one, and it surely puzzled a good many of the colonists who read Poor Richard's:

"Not long after (the middle of the Year), a visible Army of 20000 Musketers will land, some in Virginia & Maryland, and some in the lower Counties on both sides of Delaware, who will over-run the Country, and sorely annoy the Inhabitants: But the Air in this Climate will agree with them so ill toward Winter, that they will die in the beginning of cold weather like rotten Sheep, and by Christmas the Inhabitants will get the better of them."

Franklin withheld the answers to his enigmas until his almanac of the following year. It was then he explained:

"The Army which it was said would land in Virginia, Maryland, and the Lower Counties on Delaware, were not Musketers with Guns on their Shoulders as some expected; but their Namesakes, in Pronunciation, tho' truly spelt Moschitos, arm'd only with a sharp Sting. Every one knows they are Fish before they fly, being bred in the Water; and therefore may properly be said to land before they become generally troublesome."

Almanacs were probably the only place where puzzles could have appeared in America prior to 1730. Books of puzzles could not have been written and published because popular entertainments were looked down upon. Magazines and newspapers were not yet being published. Almanacs provided the unique vehicle for presentation of word puzzles,

for they were widely circulated and could be entertaining as well as useful.

While enigmas and riddles were popular in America during the seventeenth century, other forms of wordplay were also widely practiced. The most popular form was undoubtedly elegaic anagramming. Writers took great pleasure and pride in rearranging the letters from people's names in order to form phrases or sentences that described certain qualities of the people anagrammatized.

Three of the best known American anagrammatists of the century were John Wilson, Samuel Danforth, and John Fiske, who all used anagrams in the elegies they wrote. Wilson was particularly famous among his contemporaries for his skill in anagrammatizing. On the death of Joseph Briscoe, John Wilson anagrammatized the man's name into "Job cries hopes," and followed it with an elegy explaining the anagram's significance.

Kenneth Murdock's Handkerchiefs from Paul reprints an anagram constructed by Samuel Danforth on the death of William Tompson. Note that the anagram is imperfect, containing one too many of the letters L and A, and one too few of the letter M:

"William Tompson anagram I; lo, now i am past ill."

"Why wepe yea still for me, my Children dear?

What cause have ye of sorrow, grief or fear?

Lo, now all euill things are past and gone,

Terror, black Coller & stranguillion;

My pains are Curd, no greif doth me anoy,

My sorrows all are turned in to joy.

No fiend of hell shall hence forth me asay,

My fears are heald, my teares are wipt away;

Gods reconciled face j now behould,

He that dispersd my darkness many fold;

In Abrams bosom now i swetely rest,

Of perfect joy & hapiness posest."

Americans during the early eighteenth century were probably well acquainted with word puzzles through British periodicals of the period. The London Magazine printed numerous enigmas and literary riddles during the 1730s and the following decades. Other British magazines did the same.

In America, word puzzles appeared very early in the first magazines and newspapers that were published. One early newspaper was the New-York Weekly Journal, edited by John Peter Zenger, who is famous for winning a landmark case for freedom of the press in 1734. In No. 389 of his newspaper, for May 18, 1741, Zenger copied a letter and puzzle from the Barbados Gazette, a newspaper from a British colony in the West Indies. The letter was signed "Enigmaticus" and it asked readers to solve the accompanying puzzle:

"I am a bitter, but a wholesome good;

Where but my virtues better understood;  
 For many things impossible to thought,  
 Have been by me to full Perfection brought,  
 The daring of the soul proceeds from me,  
 With prudence, diligence, activity,  
 Sharpness of Wit and fortitude I give,  
 And teach the patient Man to better live,  
 When Men, once strange to me, my virtues prove,  
 Themselves I make them know and him above.  
 The flatt' rer from the friend I give to know;  
 In me a fair possession lies, but (oh!  
 The Childishness of men) all me refuse,  
 Because I'm plain, and gaudy trifles chuse.  
 I'm made the scorn of ev'ry soppish fool,  
 Insulted, hated, turn'd to ridicule."

He added, "An acquaintance of mine insists that I shall give him a solution of the following AEnigma, . . . I confess to you it has puzzled me a good deal." A reader of the Barbados Gazette who called himself "Solutioticus" sent in a similar poem giving poverty as the answer. Evidently Zenger did not think very highly of enigmatic puzzles, for only one other is known to have appeared, in No. 428 for February 8, 1742.

In fact, none of the early American newspapers printed many word puzzles. The newspapers throughout the eighteenth century were filled mainly with essays and news items, and poetry and entertainments were kept to a minimum.

With American magazines, however, it was a different story. The majority of magazines did seek to entertain people, and puzzles appeared in them almost from the beginning.

The first periodical published in the American colonies appeared in February 1741, but lasted only three months. Two more short-lived ventures were undertaken before the first important American magazine was started. It was in September 1743 that the first issue of The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle appeared, published in Boston and edited by Jeremy Gridley. The magazine was published continuously for over three years and attained substantial popularity.

In the very first issue, a riddle addressed "For the Ladies" appeared in the Poetical Essays section:

"To you fair maidens, I address; sent to adorn your Life:  
 And she who first my name can guess, shall first be made a wife.  
 From the dark womb of mother earth, to mortals aid I come,  
 But e'er I can receive my birth, I many shapes assume.  
 Passive my nature, yet I'm made as active as the roe;  
 And oftentimes, with equal speed, thro' flow'ry lawns I go.  
 When wicked men their wealth consume and leave their children poor,  
 To me their daughters often come, and I increase their store.  
 The women of the wiser kind did never yet refuse me;



And yet I never once could find, the maids of honour use me.  
 The lily hand, the brilliant eye, can charm without my aid;  
 Beauty may prompt the lover's sighs, and celebrate the maid:  
 But let th' enchanting nymph be told, unless I grace her life,  
 She must have wondrous store of gold; or make a wretched wife.  
 Altho' I never hope for rest, with christians I go forth,  
 And while they worship toward the east, I prostrate to the north.  
 If you suspect hypocrisy, or think me insincere,  
 Produce the zealot, who like me, can tremble and adhere."

The answer, "a needle," was given in verse the following month. Three more enigmas later appeared, in the December 1743, June 1744 and June 1746 issues. Although all were probably taken from British magazines or books, their publication in America shows that puzzling was a well-known and popular pastime.

During the late 1740s and early 1750s, a major change was coming over word puzzling in England. For the first time, puzzles which manipulated the letters of words were becoming popular. In the October 1748 issue of the London Magazine, a special kind of enigma called a beheadment was printed. The reader solved the first part of the puzzle to get the word "glass," then took off the initial letter of that word to make "lass," and then took off that word's initial letter to leave "ass". Another type of puzzle gaining popularity in England during this period was the charade, although the term "charade" did not come into use until some years later. In the February 1752 issue of the London Magazine, for example, readers were asked to solve the versified clues for the words "ports" and "mouth," and then to combine them to form the name of the town "Portsmouth".

As might have been expected, these new types of puzzles soon spread to the United States. The first major magazine of any type to appear after The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle of 1743-1746 was The American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies, published in Philadelphia during 1757-1758. In December 1757, "Amelia" (clearly an American) contributed the following:

"To a fifth of the wind, that pierces us most,  
 Add the name of a beast by shepherds oft lost,  
 The name of a river by Cambrians fam'd,  
 With the third of a name by Britains oft blam'd;  
 Join the fifth of a name oft in pillory shown; --  
 These will instantly give you the name of my town."

The answer involved taking the first letter or letters from various words and putting them together to make the name of a town. Thus, "The wind that pierces us most" was the "north" wind, and the first fifth of that word was the letter N. The beast was the "ew", the river was the "Y" (actually, the river Wye of Wales), the name blamed by Britains was "Orford," and the man in the pillory was a "knave". Taking the letters as directed spelled out "New York," the town in which the author of the puzzle evidently lived.

The regular enigmas, of course, remained the standard puzzle fare of the day. Most of the best ones appear to have originated in England, although it is impossible to say. In *The American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies* for December 1757, an excellent enigma on "a riddle" appeared along with the rebus above. Since no author's name appeared next to the enigma, it was almost certainly taken from another source:

"First form'd and bred within some musing brain,  
My birth relieves the lab'ring parent's pain,  
Forth from whose head, Minerva-like, I come,  
At once mature, and in my fullest bloom.  
Pleas'd with the novelty, he sends t'invite  
His curious friends, spectators of the sight.  
But as my form is delectate, I wear  
A mask, to screen my features from the air;  
Nor must the prying guests approach too near.  
My shape's so curious, and my dress so new,  
The wond'ring crowd my strange appearance view;  
With studious thoughts inquisitive to find  
What cause produc'd me, and to know my kind.  
A while their searches to no purpose prove,  
And vain conjectures frequent laughter move;  
Till apprehension does my name explore,  
Then strait I vanish and exist no more."

Another early literary periodical in the colonies was *The New American Magazine*, published in Woodbridge, New Jersey from 1758 to 1760. Two good enigmas appeared in the June 1759 and August 1759 issues. Both were probably British in origin, as no authors' names were given, and the editor said that he took much of his material from European magazines.

Between 1760 and the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, colonial magazines and newspapers remained relatively few in number. Puzzles continued to appear occasionally in the poetry sections of such newspapers as the *New-London Gazette*, the *Boston Evening Post*, and the *Boston Gazette*, and in various literary magazines.

Two of the earliest American charades appeared in *The Penny Post*, a Philadelphia magazine published during early 1769. The puzzles were of very poor quality, but their appearance signalled the beginning of the growth of a variety of new types of wordplay. However, not all American word puzzles were of mediocre or poor quality. In the October 1775 issue of *The Pennsylvania Magazine* appeared a good original enigma on "the wind":

"Before that noble creature man  
Sprang from the dust, my reign began;  
Mid chaos and the realms of night,  
E'er God had said 'let there be light,'  
I was -- howled hideous -- flew with haste  
And roam'd o'er all the dreary waste.



No age but hath my fury known,  
 No clime but hears my plaintive moan;  
 On wings unseen I mount on high  
 And swifter than the eagles fly;  
 O'er mountains, plains and valleys wide,  
 O'er rivers, lakes and seas I glide.  
 Sometimes mankind in me are blest,  
 They court me as a welcome guest;  
 Wide ope their doors to let me in  
 And sigh if I've long absent been:  
 But soon I find their friendship change;  
 At large in fields I'm left to range:  
 Tho, late they lov'd, they love no more  
 But fast against me bar the door.  
 Men say I'm fickle but I find  
 They're full as apt to change their mind:  
 Thro' ev'ry street I cry in vain,  
 Admittance no where can I gain;  
 Except amongst the poorer sort,  
 To whom, unwelcome, I resort.  
 The wealth of nations I encrease  
 Without me commerce soon would cease;  
 And yet, some to their sorrow know,  
 To commerce I'm a fatal foe.  
 Great is my pow'r -- men well may fear  
 When my tremendous voice they hear:  
 From east and west, from south & north  
 I call my sullen armies forth;  
 The gloomy host obscures the day  
 And dire destruction marks my way."

Word puzzling was very limited in America prior to the end of the Revolutionary War, just as literature in general was limited to a great extent. It was during this period, however, that the art of making and solving word puzzles was taking root in America and beginning to grow. The results of this germination became quite apparent in the twenty years at the close of the eighteenth century.